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THE APPOINTMENT AND TENURE  
OF  
POSTMASTERS.

A PAPER

READ AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF

THE NATIONAL CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE

DECEMBER 12, 1895,

BY

RICHARD HENRY DANA, ESQ.

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PUBLISHED FOR THE  
NATIONAL CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM LEAGUE.

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PRESS OF  
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NEW YORK.

# The Appointment and Tenure of Postmasters.

BY RICHARD HENRY DANA.

It is a curious fact about our so-called "American" Spoils system in politics, that we spoil not a distant enemy, nor even some other race living in our midst, as the Turks do the Armenians, but we despoil ourselves in making spoils of our own institutions. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the postal service of the United States.

Our post-office department is the largest department in the country, and on its efficient management depends much of our material and intellectual progress as well as our daily convenience, and yet we have been letting our representatives strengthen their political fences by making frequent changes and unfit appointments, in a way that would ruin any business exposed to open competition. As a result, we have the worst postal service of any civilized country in the world. In Tokio, Japan, they had quite recently more frequent deliveries than in New York City, and there are improvements adopted in England, France, Germany and Italy twenty and thirty years ago which we have not yet adopted at all, or only partially and imperfectly. For example, in the large cities of those countries there are numerous branch offices, so numerous as to be for all practical purposes as accessible as letter boxes with us, where stamps or money orders can be bought, where parcels can be weighed, and where matter can be mailed. When with us a note is dropped into a letter box, there it lies untouched for one, two or three hours, till the collector takes it out, and it is not assorted till the collector deposits it at the post-office. When, however, it is mailed in one of these branch offices abroad, it is immediately cancelled and assorted, so that the time which would be wasted in the letter box, is utilized and the note is ready for direct delivery at the first call of the carrier.

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This expedites the local city deliveries, so that a note mailed at a branch office is delivered almost as quickly as if sent by a private special messenger, and this again so stimulates the local use of the mails that the extra expense is reported to be more than made up by the increased sale of postage stamps.

For some twenty years or more we did nothing towards adopting this plan, and not only was all the time lost while the mail was waiting in the letter box, but a letter posted within half a mile of its destination often had to be carried two, three, or even four miles to the central office to be assorted, and then to travel all the way back, going over perhaps eight miles in all to accomplish a half a mile. We have very tardily adopted in some of our largest cities a few branch offices, but so few and far between that they do not half serve their purpose.

This is only one of numerous instances that could be cited to illustrate how much our postal system has been spoiled.

Not only in detail has it been thus spoiled, but so much have the postmasters-general and their assistants been occupied with the distribution of patronage that they have not had the time to attend to the organization of the department.

For example, a business man appointed postmaster General writes to some of the model postmasters to consult with him on the business of the service. On account of the pressure of Congressmen he is unable to fix a date before the June after his inauguration in March, but even then these model postmasters get no further than his ante-room, where they vainly wait many valuable hours, while the office-seekers, under the wing of members of Congress, pass in before them. At last, after about a week of waiting, one of these model postmasters gets into the inner room, and finds the Postmaster General engaged in a discussion with a negro postmaster of a small town in the South over the question whether the appointment should not be revoked, not on the ground of unfitness, but because of a rumor that this negro had once attended a Democratic caucus. After some quarter of an hour consumed over this question, so vastly important to the postal service, the Postmaster-General has a moment or two to shake hands and explain that the business consultation must be postponed till the next August, as he is overwhelmed with the pressure for places. This story I tell not as illustrating the



work of any one man, but of the heretofore usual duties of this cabinet position in general.

As a result, the organization of the department is on the same basis that it was under Franklin, when there were 75 post-offices in the country. When ordinary business grows large it is subdivided. The express companies, for example, are divided into districts, with a superintendent for each. So with the great railroads and with the post-offices in Great Britain; so with an army. But in the United States postal service there is nothing between the bureau at Washington and the postmasters. It is like an army with no majors, no colonels, no brigadier generals; in fact, with no officers between the general-in-chief with his staff and the captains of companies.

All the questions relating to the wants of the various postmasters have practically to be passed on by two clerks at Washington, who are too far off to be able to judge of the circumstances. Apparently they have to decide by lot in most cases, granting one-fourth or one-eighth of the requests, as it may be, in proportion to the appropriation. For example, from the Boston post-office is sent a request for a New England Directory; price \$7.50. The request is denied. As a consequence a clerk at a salary of \$750 a year has to be detailed to make out a list of names needing further addresses, go out and look over the directories belonging to some business men, as a favor, and bring back the desired addresses, to the great loss of money to the office and delay to the re-addressed letters.

Again, here are two towns, one 25 and the other 29 miles from Boston, and about four miles apart, with railroad connection between them. The letters from one to the other are sent all the way to Boston, there to be assorted and sent back to the other town, taking on an average about a day and a half. There is much correspondence between the two places. Who is to make the short cut?

The only persons officially charged with changing the routes are in Washington. They have no idea of the merits of the case. The postmasters of these two towns may write to Washington, but it is supererogation on their part if they do, and they are usually told, in reply, to attend to their own business. The only way to have the change made is for the

prominent men of both towns to bring pressure to bear on the department and to make the life of their Congressman miserable till, after perhaps two years of agitation, at a great personal sacrifice, the change is at last made.

Indeed it is one of the greatest tributes possible to the versatility and natural business talent of the American people that amid all these frequent political changes of postmasters and this utter want of organization the business of the department is carried on at all.

That the people of the United States do not rise and demand a better service is because they have not seen any better, and do not know of the possibilities of a really good post-office department. It is only a small portion of the small minority who travel abroad that have intelligently observed and compared our postal system and that of other civilized countries.

Let us only hope that the future historian may not judge our present advancement in civilization and intelligence by the workings of the greatest of our national departments. If any proof is required that it is the spoils system which has spoiled our postal service, it is to be found in the records of the railway mail service. For a number of years there has been kept a separate account of the number of pieces correctly distributed in that branch of the service and the number of errors. During the twelve months covered by the last year of the administration of President Arthur, following a previous Republican administration, in neither of which was the railway mail service looted, though the appointments were confessedly political, the number of correct distributions to one error had reached the high number of 5,575. On the incoming of the Cleveland administration many removals were made on political grounds, and the record fell to 3,364, rising again to nearly 4,000, after the men had got used to their work, in the last year of his administration. On the incoming of the Harrison administration, as all will remember, the railway mail service was looted, and that with unprecedented rapidity of removals, as the civil service law was to go into operation a few months after the inauguration. As a result, the number of correct distributions fell to 2,834 to each error, the lowest number on record. Since then the railway mail has been under civil service rules. In two years it reached



the highest previous record, the next year passed it, last year came up to 7,831, and this year (1895) to the truly wonderful record of 8,894. To fortify these telling statistics let me quote from the language of the General Superintendent of the Railway Mail Service\* the following: "The civil service laws and regulations as applied to the Railway Mail Service accomplish all the most sanguine expected. The eligibles for appointment who have been certified and selected excel in the fundamental qualities, such as suitable age, good physical condition and habits, activity and retentiveness of memory, and prospective growth and length of useful service.

Having such desirable undeveloped material to work upon, the management experience less difficulty in molding it into well-disciplined, industrious, thoughtful, efficient clerks. A much larger per cent. of the probationers succeed in earning permanent appointments, and under the system of development which obtains in the service, they continue to improve during their connection with it; and, as opportunities occur, are advanced in class according to their merits. In the judgment of this office, the present efficiency could not have been obtained under any other method."

Again, the record in the post-offices outside of the railway mail tells the same story. It is well remembered how rapidly the official heads of the postmasters fell under the axe of the headsman Mr. Clarkson. As a result, the number of complaints the next year increased 36 per cent., and the number of "losses chargeable to carelessness or depredation of postal employees" increased 64 per cent., according to the official reports.†

Important as are efficiency and economy in our vast postal business, yet these are not the subjects that concern us most. Were they the only issues, we should not be here. It is because of the corrupting influence of the spoils system on our politics and the danger to our liberties that so many busy persons annually meet to discuss the reform of our civil service. In no branch is the danger to our liberties so great as in the postal service. It composes more than half of our whole civil list. There are over 70,000 postmasters, or about one to every 130 voters; and if every postmaster can muster five friends,

\* Report P. M. Gen'l 1894, p. 395.

† Reports of the Postmaster General, 1889, p. 167, and 1890, pp. 177 and 179.

they together make 420,000, one in 29 voters, or a clear majority of all persons taking an active part in our nominating machinery. The postmasters, being scattered in every village and hamlet in the country, are from their situation more useful in manipulating delegates to large conventions than the same number of employees gathered together in one or two places. As to corruption, we have seen the bargaining of postmaster-ships at conventions in trade for votes of delegates, to say nothing of selling them by Congressmen or defeated candidates for Congress of the dominant party for ready money.

We give special welcome, therefore, to the messenger bringing us news that the postmasterships, or any number of them, have permanently been fortified against the raids of the Kurdish-like spoilers, and the recent order of the President has a peculiar and almost absorbing interest; it cheers the heart and brings hope to the breast.

Those, who have given special attention for several years past to the possible ways of bringing postmasters under the reform system, agree that if the plan contemplated in this order is carried out we shall have the most important, if not the greatest in number, of the postmasters taken out of politics, and incidentally the business organization of the postal department greatly improved.

In 1889 I read a paper before this League on the subject, "The Post-Offices to be Taken out of Politics." The plan I suggested was, first, dividing the country into postal districts, with a superintendent over each; next, appointing the presidential postmasters by way of promotion of other postmasters or of postal employees within the classified service of the district, putting all fourth class postmasters with a salary above \$500. under civil service rules, and for the rest of the places, with lower salaries, to make the declaration by law or executive order that neither removals nor appointments should be made on political grounds, allowing no removals except after a hearing and on the reports of post-office inspectors who were then as now under civil service rules, and that appointments should be made under regulations substantially like those incorporated in what has since been called the Lodge Bill for the appointment of fourth-class postmasters.

The plan now proposed by the President and Postmaster General is to consolidate as far as possible neighboring offices

with larger ones, as has been so successfully done in Boston and its vicinity, only including many more post-offices, so that all the post-offices in the eastern part of Massachusetts, for example, should be part of the Boston office. In this way the districting of the post-offices is largely effected. Next, all the offices thus consolidated, including the postmasters of the annexed offices, who will henceforward be superintendents, are by the order put under civil service rules. In this way most of those who have heretofore been presidential postmasters of the second and third classes will be appointed by promotion, and the lower positions will be filled by competitive examination conducted by the civil service commission.

By making the postmasters of the subordinate offices into superintendents, our old enemy, the four-year law of 1820, is shorn of more than half its power for ill, for second and third class presidential postmasters made up more than half of all the officers to whom the law applied.

One difficulty, however, still remains, and that is to decide how to treat the fourth-class postmasters with small salaries. In order to understand the situation, it must be remembered that of the 66,500 fourth-class postmasters the average salary is only \$167 a year, and about 47,000 have a salary of under \$200.

If a clerk with a salary of \$750 a year were substituted for each fourth-class postmaster, it would cost the department \$39,000,000 a year. By the new order, however, the difficulty seems to be less than it would be under the operation of the Lodge Bill alone. If any fourth-class post-office, consolidated under the order has too small a salary to invite competition, it can be treated just as some other places for which there is no competition are now treated under the civil service rules. If no persons apply for a competitive examination for a position, then none is held, and a pass one is substituted. (Clause 7, section 2, of the civil service law.) The only precaution necessary is not to allow promotion from positions so filled without an examination which is competitive, so as to prevent a well known way of evading the law. This point seems to be at least partly covered by the civil service rules now in force. (General Rule III., clause 2 (c), and Postal Rule 2, clause 6). But I believe many persons would apply for competition for a position under this order, with its possible promotion ahead,

who would never do so for the place alone by itself. But few would care to embark in a small boat to cross the ocean, with the additional risk of being tipped out on purpose when not quarter through the voyage, but many will gladly get in a small boat to be rowed to a larger vessel, with a good chance of staying aboard the latter till transferred to still larger.

Again, it must be remembered that many fourth class postmasters are allowed to supplement their salaries by keeping a store or by being a clerk in a store in which the office is situated, just as is the case with some of the smaller consulates. Indeed, it is the custom the post-office brings to the store that gives the post-office its chief value in many small towns.

Under the order and proposed plan of extensive consolidation we shall have some 3,000 presidential post-offices taken out of the operation of the four-year-term law, and these, together with their subordinates and perhaps at first 5,000 fourth-class postmasters, and later possibly 20,000 more, put under civil service rules. Every one who enters at the lower grades knows he has entered a profession where he may, by faithful and able work, rise to the head of a large consolidated post-office, and we also get a substantial subdivision of the post-offices into districts, with a head postmaster in charge of each.

This is a most important gain. It will eventually bring under civil service rules twice as many new positions as were originally classified when the Pendleton Bill was passed.

On the basis of the present national civil service, the additions under this order will make the whole classified service nearly if not more than one-half the whole civil list.

With this it seems the back of the spoils monster is broken, and it only remains for us to complete the work in good fashion.

To complete the work as far as the post-office department is concerned, for the places above the scope of the present plan the four-year law should be repealed either by law or in substance by establishing an executive custom of reappointing the postmasters at the head of these consolidated offices on the expiration of their terms and filling vacancies among these postmasters by promotion, and also by putting all the positions except those of Postmaster General and his private secretary within the classified service, and, for the places below the

scope of this present order, namely, the scattered fourth-class offices with small salaries, too distant from a large office to be consolidated, I should apply the principles of the Lodge Bill\* for selection of applicants; and to that I should add that no removals should be made except after giving the postmaster notice of the charges and a chance to be heard, and only on the report of the inspector or other official before whom the hearing took place. By the official report of an "off year" for political changes (1887), it appears that more than one-half the removals were made on reports of inspectors. Why not require that all removals should be made on official reports? Suspension during investigation would cover all cases of need of immediate procedure on account of criminal acts.

When all this is done, and when some more extensions in other departments, now contemplated which, I am informed, will include some 17,000 more places, have been made, we may know that not only is the back of the spoils monster broken, but that the work of extermination is practically completed, and we may prepare to attend the funeral obsequies, keeping, however, our eye open all the while and our hand at the sword hilt, lest some hydra head spring to life again.

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\* H. R. Doc., No. 7707, 51st Congress, 1st session.





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